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Class helps turn a life of memories into memoirs

By JOSH NOEL
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The graying heads tilt down and the wrinkled hands begin to move. Ten minutes later, another slice of history has been written. The authors, men between 75 and 84 years old, read aloud.

Nick tells of not marrying until his 40s because he was "kind of a playboy."

George never married, but feels as if he did after supervising 28 women in a factory for 23 years. It was those women, crying on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, who told him the president had been assassinated.

Bob tells of buying an Air Trails magazine in 1949 to kill time on a bus ride through Nebraska. Thumbing through the pages, he saw an advertisement that led him to a job at United Airlines, where he met his wife and worked for 42 years.

Until now, most of these men had never written much beyond business letters, memos or maybe a greeting-card inscription. But at two large tables tucked in a third-floor corner of the Des Plaines Public Library, they are becoming first-time authors.

Every Wednesday for six weeks this summer, the seven students' subjects are themselves. When they are finished, their scraps of stories will be the makings of their memoirs.

"I personally want to write stories," said Bob Roeder, 75, a father of six who retired from United Airlines in 1994. "There are a lot of disjointed things I'd like to pass on. I just need to figure out how to put it together."

David Whittingham, 36, a library staff member, runs the seminar. He modeled the lessons on a similar class the library offers to older women. But the inspiration was his father's death.

Richard Whittingham published more than 30 books, mostly non-fiction, before he died of a heart attack in February, but he never wrote the thing his son most wanted to read: an autobiography.

David Whittingham never heard his father's stories of Army life or of wooing his mother. When Richard Whittingham died, his stories died too. His son wanted to be sure that didn't happen to others.

"This was something I had to do," said David Whittingham, a DePaul University graduate who lives in Rogers Park. "It's in memory of him and for the families of the men participating."

The Des Plaines classes are among a handful of memoir-writing workshops in the Chicago area. Both the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Newberry Library offer non-credit memoir classes for a fee, and they are open to anyone.

Carol LaChapelle, who taught at the Newberry for five years, is taking the seminar a step further, offering a four-day memoir writing retreat later this summer in Madison, Wis. Eight women and one man, all from Chicago, have signed up.

LaChapelle, a writing teacher who began to focus on memoirs five years ago, traces interest in the genre, like many observers, to best sellers such as "Angela's Ashes" by Frank McCourt and "Liars' Club" by

Mary Karr, stories of tough and impoverished childhoods published in the mid-1990s. She said her first class at the Newberry filled up so quickly that the library had to offer another session.

"The impulse to tell our stories is ever present," she said. "I think we're hardwired for narrative, and I can care about anyone's story if you make me care. I care if you can make your story universal enough for me to learn something in my own life."

The motives in memoir-writing workshops seem to vary. Some students have no interest in publishing their life stories; they simply want to pass along family history. Others want to tell about specific events--like the UIC student who was a woman, underwent a sex-change operation, then married a longtime female partner. Still more see success in the genre and take their own stab at it, figuring their lives are as interesting as anyone else's.

"The problem I face is how to help the person tell their story," said Brooke Bergan, who taught the transsexual author-to-be.

Samuel G. Freedman, a book-writing professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, said he is wary of the genre in the hands of younger authors who only seize on the "my dysfunctional family" trend in memoir writing.

But he approved of memoir writing classes for people older than 60.

"It's the greatest idea I've heard," he said. "The confessional culture is tiresome in the hands of a 20- or 30-year old, but is helpful and liberating for people in their 60s, 70s and 80s. These are people who were brought up in an era where it was unseemly to talk about yourself, but who have had experiences and things to say."

The initial idea for the Des Plaines classes came from the Older Women's Legacy Circle in Austin, Texas, a memoir workshop founded in 1998. Ten OWL chapters have sprung up in North America, but the Des Plaines class appears to be the first one redesigned for men.

Asked by one of his students about differences between the men's and women's classes, Whittingham said the women's class "cries a lot."

There is no crying among the men.

In their small classroom, where the library has set out a pitcher of water and thermos of decaffeinated coffee, the men trade stories about their families, wedding days and long-over work lives with ease. They bond over growing up during the Depression--one wrote of his family's joy the first time his father earned \$100 in a month--but settling into comfortable professional middle-class lives.

Confidentiality is key, but they make light even of this.

"If you tell us you're cheating on your wife, we're not supposed to repeat it," one says.

"Mum's the word," said another.

Whittingham sticks close to a 60-page workbook geared more to jog memory--and to get participants writing about what's been seminal in their lives--rather than to bring about a finished product. In the chapter called "Memories," he asked the men to bring in and write about a keepsake.

They read from their essays: Ed Brizzolara, 77, about the small blue altar-boy pin he got a lifetime ago; Roeder about the deed from his parents' land in Nebraska; George Kallas, 75, about black-and-white photos of his parents.

"I'm amazed at myself because I'm so concise," Kallas said. "I'm not flowery. I heard all these writers go

through so much turmoil, but it hasn't been that bad."

None of the students seem sure what their final product will look like. But the goal is largely preserving family history--before it's too late--rather than making the world understand their lives.

"I'm sure [publishers] are not sitting around in New York wondering what those guys in Des Plaines are going to come up with next," said Brizzolara, a retired salesman. "Really, it's something to pass on for our children and grandchildren. Or maybe they'll just throw the damn thing away. I don't know."

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